



Naina Rao Athalye

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"You may notice that I have a sight impairment but I have big visions and dreams," the 13-year old from Tamil Nadu told the 57th United Nations session on the Commission on the Status of Women, which met in New York on March 8 this year.

"I dream the children should take pleasure in the love of their parents, their neighbours and of the world. I dream of equal rights for both men and women. I dream that no man is left hungry in the world. I dream that there are no wars in the world. I hear that the whole world is colourful. But to me, as I said earlier, the real colour is the colour of love. I visualise that one day I will join this august world of love."

Unlike the courageous Pakistani girl Mallala Yousufzai, whose address before a UN gathering was a global news event, Swarnalakshmi did not make big news. However, Swarnalakshmi, supported by the Christian Blind Mission India and the Neighbourhood Community Network, won the hearts of many with her little speech at the special session on 'zero tolerance against violence towards girls and women' and later at Fordham University in the same city.

Winning hearts is not new for Swarna, as her friends call her, as she has risen to become the 'prime minister of the Tamil Nadu state children's parliament'. In fact, she spoke about her organisation's work at the UN too: "We have children's parliaments in India. And the Tamil Nadu children's parliament has decided to tackle the issue of violence against girls and women by promoting rights awareness and actively preventing child labour, child marriage and by encouraging education."

I too have a dream

The vision of a visually challenged girl and hope of better governance

Although visually impaired, Swarna's inner confidence glowed through her smile and articulation. She is a fine example of how love and care from parents, teachers and peers can boost courage and leadership skills in a child with a severe disability.

Swarna's initiation into public life started with the 'neighbourhood children's parliament', known here as Anna Salivan, where children come together to not only discuss issues that matter to them but also find solutions for them and get the elders to deliver. She was first elected as 'communications minister' and later became 'finance minister'. Among many of her other achievements during her tenure as finance minister was mobilisation of resources for the children survivors of the Tahane Storm in Cuddalore

district and participation in the 'Nine is Mine' campaign that coaxes the government to allocate 9 percent of the budget to children's welfare.

Other children like her way of doing things and in time elected her the 'PM of the Tamil Nadu state children's parliament' in December 2012.

The only child of Ravi Duraikannu, an Accenture employee, and Lakshmi, a housewife, Swarna aspires to become an Indian administrative service (IAS) officer so that she can better serve society, especially the visually and physically challenged, and work towards prevention of violence against girls.

Ask her if she'd like to become the country's prime minister one day, and Swarna says with an innocent smile, "Why not?"





Young parliamentarians

Swarna's confidence and vision are the product of her participation in the children's parliament – a concept based on a small group representation or 'sociocratic governance' where the voices of small and marginalised groups are heard.

Kees Boeke, a Dutch peace worker and educator, was the first to use this model among children in the Netherlands in the mid-20th century and called it the 'children's community workshop'.

Children's parliament is one of the many ways in which the rights of the children to participation (as prescribed under the articles 12 and 13 of the UNCRC; see box for more) are met. Today there are over 360 children's parliaments initiated by the Holistic Child Development India in collaboration with Kindernothilfe, Germany and Eriks Sweden.

The children's parliaments in north India, Karnataka and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands have 3,735 girls participating as parliamentarians with nearly 60% girls holding ministerial posts. These young parliamentarians, both boys and girls, undergo training in life skills, equipping them with the attitude to respect human rights,



Children as decision-makers

Articles 12 and 13 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) pertain to the right of children to participate in decision-making. These provisions are a welcome step for developing leadership qualities in children and getting their voices heard. Leadership skills among girl children, however, have not received much attention. Considering the gender disparities in India, involving girl children in decision-making may seem very utopian. Women's empowerment can begin with training women and girls in skills for management and governance. Experts point out that it can be started at home, where parents can encourage daughters to voice their opinions and take leadership in day-to-day home life. Mothers can act as role models for daughters by being good managers and leaders themselves. October 11 is celebrated as the World Girl Child Day.

assume responsibilities and enjoy their rights.

The children members elect their ministers through a process of consensus and parliament meets every week. Objections against those selected are discussed and resolved amicably.

Parliament serves as a forum for children to share their views about their school, family and friends alongside understanding their rights and duties.

Such a group has manifold benefits, especially for children at high risk. Knowing that they can come to a place where they are free to talk and be heard encourages them to share experiences of abuse and violence.

This is particularly true of culturally oppressed girl children who suffer violence due to their caste and the Devdasi system in Karnataka.

Civil society stakeholders such as teachers, women's self-help groups, panchayat elders and health workers form child protection committees within the villages and neighbourhood that help sustain these parliaments.

Boys in these parliaments not only

respect the right of the girl members but also follow instructions from girl ministers even if they have differences of opinion.

Involving boys in issues of gender discrimination has helped them challenge gender stereotypes, which have made them nurturers of girls' rights.

Not only are children in the 8-18 age group becoming more gender sensitive but they have also managed to create plastic-free zones in their villages and put errant teachers in their schools in place. They have also helped dalit children forced into bonded labour to return to schools.

What is truly delightful is that children have been actively involved in community service, peace education and gender reconciliation. ■

Dr Athalye is programme coordinator of the Department of Children at High Risk at Holistic Child Development India, Pune. She thanks Fr Edwin John at NCN, Sr Gladys, project partners and many wonderful children parliamentarians, Kindernothilfe and Erikshjalpen. feedback@governancenow.com



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